



Ontological Displacement and Environmental Justice: A Postcolonial Ecocritical Reading of Pratibha Ray's *Adibhoomi*

Rajesh Kumar Maity

Department of Language and Literature, Fakir Mohan University (Alumnus)

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Abstract— This paper examines the symbiotic relationship between the Bonda tribe of Malkangiri and their ancestral ecology as portrayed in Pratibha Ray's *Adibhoomi*. Situated within Postcolonial Ecocriticism, the study critiques the anthropocentric logic of industrial modernity that threatens one of Odisha's most ancient indigenous communities. While Ecocriticism is a contemporary academic discipline, the Bonda worldview reflects a primordial ecological consciousness rooted in spiritual and cultural interdependence with the natural world. The paper introduces the concept of ontological displacement—a condition that extends beyond physical relocation to signify the erosion of a community's cultural being and cosmology. Through Ray's narrative, the commodification of sacred groves and ecological spaces is shown to destabilize indigenous identity at its core. By contrasting tribal ecological wisdom with extractive developmental paradigms, the study argues that genuine environmental justice demands a shift from resource exploitation toward a bio-centric model of coexistence.



Keywords— Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Ontological Displacement, Environmental Justice, Indigenous Ecology, *Adibhoomi*

I. INTRODUCTION

The novel title *Adibhoomi* (*The Primal Land*) shows the profound linguistic signifier for a space where the “natural” and “human” have not been yet bifurcated by the Enlightenment dualism. The ecology isn't merely a scenic background for human action rather, it is the sustainer and source of the Bonda tribe of Malkangiri district of Odisha. Ray's novel serves as a “literary ethnography”, depicting a community that sees the earth as a sentient and ancestral mother rather as a cache of raw materials.

Within the Postcolonial Ecocriticism framework, the novel reflects poignant opposition to the “Second Colonization”, the assertive and aggressive push for the post-independence industrial development and bureaucratic management. The tribal landscapes always categorized as “wastelands” or “unproductive spaces” that are frequently waiting to be extracted in this modern paradigm. However, in the Bonda worldview the distance between the self and soil collapses.

To the Bonda tribe, the hills are not property to be owned rather a geography which is sacred and is to be inhabited.

To describe the particular violence imposed upon the Bonda tribe, this paper introduces the concept of ontological displacement. Ontological displacement is very different from physical displacement. Where physical displacement accounts for the forced movements of bodies; the ontological displacement signifies the erosion of a community, its “cultural being” and its unique cosmology. The Bonda identity is destabilized from its core when the “anthropocentric logic” of industrial modernity commodifies sacred groves and enforces extractive developmental models and also depletes resources.

By comparing the Bonda tribe's primordial ecological knowledge and wisdom with modern developmental paradigms, this research contends that genuine environmental justice for indigenous populations cannot be achieved through monetary compensation or relocation.

Instead, it requires a fundamental change from the resource exploitation to a bio-centered approach of harmony, acknowledging the Bonda tribe not as “backward subjects”, rather as the primary guardians of a primal ecological consciousness.

II. DEFINING ONTOLOGICAL DISPLACEMENT: MORE THAN JUST PHYSICAL MOVEMENT

In traditional sociological discourse, displacement is often quantified by the physical uprooting of bodies from one geographic to another. However, Pratibha Ray's *Adibhoomi* requires a more nuanced framework: ontological displacement. This condition pertains to the fragmentation of the “self” that happens when the external landscape, which reflects the internal spirit of a community, is essentially altered or desacralized.

For the Bonda tribe, the woods serve as a vibrant repository of their cosmology. Every rock, stream, and Sarna (sacred grove) is populated by ancestral beings and gods who establish the ethical and societal sequence of the clan. When industrial modernity encroaches upon Malkangiri, it isn't always start with a bulldozer; it starts with the bureaucratic map. By superimposing legal boundaries and “state property” designations imposed on ancestral territories, the postcolonial state effectively “evicts” the gods prior to evicting the inhabitants.

The Bonda tribe's displacement in the novel is marked by significant breaks that disturb their cultural, spiritual and intellectual foundations. One of the most important is the desacralization of space. Traditionally, the forest is not just a physical space for the Bonda tribe but a sacred terrain, a home to divine entities that shape their cosmology and everyday existence. However, in the novel, this hallowed area is slowly changed into a “unit of production” due to the state development initiatives and commercial use. When sacred groves are removed for roads, plantations, or administrative endeavours, the Bonda tribe feel a deep sense of spiritual dislocation. Although they might continue to reside in the same geographical location, the symbolic and spiritual structures that once gave meaning to their lives are deconstructed, leaving them in a state of what can be called cosmological homelessness.

Another additional critical aspect of this displacement is epistemic violence. The Bonda tribe hold a profound wealth of nature-centered knowledge cultivated over generations of intimate engagement with the environment. Their understanding of medicinal herbs, seasonal cycles, and the sustainable farming method of Donger Chas (shifting cultivation) reflects an advanced ecological insight. However, this traditional knowledge system is often

disregarded by the Gulangbabus, or government officials, who label it to be primitive or unscientific. Such disregard not only diminishes the worth of their expertise but also negates their intellectual autonomy. As a result, the Bonda tribe are forced to perceive their cultural practices and worldview through the skewed lens of the prevailing outsider, depending their feeling of marginalization.

Finally, the displacement is also reflected in the commercialization of the soul. Traditionally, the Bonda tribe upheld a mutually beneficial relationship with the nature, driven by necessity instead of collection. Their economic activities were embedded within ecological harmony and communal ethics. However, the arrival of a cash-based economy disturbs this balance. As Sahukars (moneylenders) and market dynamics increasingly ensnared in cycles of debt and economic reliance. In order to repay debts or satisfy financial obligations, they are frequently compelled to exploit the forests they previously safeguarded. Consequently, the ethical connection between the community and the environment is replaced by an extractive logic driven by greed and survival, causing a deep moral and cultural divide within the Bonda society.

Through Pratibha Ray's narrative, we observe that ontological displacement brings about a deep identity crisis. Characters such as Soma Muduli embody this tension, caught between an ancient past that is being eliminated and contemporary future that renders them nothing more than labor or “backward” relics. The “displacement” here is the loss of a world-view that once allowed the Bonda tribe to exist in perfect equilibrium with the Adibhoomi.

The Conflict of Paradigms: Anthropocentric Modernity vs. Bonda Biocentrism

The central tension in *Adibhoomi* stems from the brutal clash between two irreconcilable theories of existence. Pratibha Ray masterfully demonstrates how the postcolonial state's anthropocentric logic- the idea that humans are masters and only beneficiaries of nature- serves as a means of erasure against the Bonda tribe's Bio-centric framework, which perceives humans as mere threads in a broader ecological fabric.

For the outsiders in the narrative- like the Gulangbabus (government officials), the Sahukars (moneylenders), and certain researchers- the Bonda Hills symbolize a frontier to be conquered, examined, and financially utilized. Their perspectives is influenced by a human-centered logic that considers nature mainly as a resource designed for human consumption. This viewpoint is evident in what can be termed as cartographic violence, where the forest is reduced to measurable units on a map and regarded solely for its economic value. Within this instrumental framework, a tree holds no real significance until is felled and transformed

into lumber, and a hill stays devoid of meaning until its minerals are mined for profit. Such a view strips the landscape of its spiritual and cultural significance, converting a vibrant ecosystem into a space for production and profit.

The anthropocentric ideology further promotes the marginalization of indigenous customs and practices by depicting them as primitive and unreasonable. The agricultural technique of Donger Chas (shifting cultivation), practiced by the Bonda for generations, is dismissed by officials as wasteful and harmful to the environment. The government justifies the taking of tribal land under the pretext of "scientific forestry" and civilizing mission of modernization by categorizing the traditional practices as unscientific. The anthropocentric paradigm not only undermines the Bonda tribe's ecological knowledge but also justifies institutional control over their resources and land.

In opposition to this exploitative perspective, the novel portrays the Bonda tribe's worldview as essentially bio-centric, and their world is interconnected between human being and natural environment as well as being flexible. For the Bonda tribe the forest and the nature are not merely commodities but a living relatives with whom they share a bond of coexistence. Their engagement with the ecosystem is shaped by a spiritual economy focused on sufficiency rather than accumulation. Rituals and traditional practices serve as ecological moderators or regulators that uphold equilibrium within the ecosystem. For instance, the gathering of certain medical herbs is limited to certain lunar phases, ensuring that the species can regenerate and survive. Such practices demonstrate a deep ecological awareness that emphasizes sustainability and respect for the natural environment.

Moreover, the Bonda's decision to abstain from the extensive large-scale exploitation of the forest is portrayed not as a sign of ignorance or backwardness but as a morally driven choice. They understand that the forest's annihilation ultimately leads to the community's own demise. This awareness reflects a deep bio-centric reality that contemporary industrial culture frequently overlooks: the survival of human life cannot be separated from the health of the natural world.

The conflict between these two perspectives is especially evident when the government introduces commercial plantations, like eucalyptus or coffee, in the Bonda Hills. From the perspective of the state, these farms represent progress, lushness, and financial revenue. However, the Bonda's view them in a completely different way. For them, these plantations form a "silent forest", lacking the rich biodiversity, medicinal plants, and ancestral spirits that historically supported their culture and livelihood. What

appears to be a flourishing environment from a distance is, in truth, a "green desert" devoid of ecological balance and spiritual meaning. This transformation ultimately demonstrates the victory of anthropocentric logic, wherein nature is modified to operate like a factory instead of a living ecosystem.

By emphasizing this conflict, Pratibha Ray implies that the Bonda are not "backward" people living in the past; instead, they are the practitioners of future-proof philosophy. Their bio-centricity provides a remedy to the extractive paradigms that have resulted in today's global climate crisis.

III. GENDERED ECOLOGY AND THE PATH TO ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

In *Adibhoomi*, the advocacy for a bio-centric worldview is depicted not as a gender-neutral process; rather, the narrative highlights Bonda women as central to ecological preservation. Ray indicates that while many Bonda men are slowly entangled in the human-centred systems introduced by outsiders- frequently getting trapped in wage labour, alcoholism, or debt to Sahukars- the women remain deeply connected to the land's rhythms. Their lives remain centred on the forests, fields, and seasonal cycles that sustain the community. In this way, the Bonda woman emerges as the main guardian of ancestral ecology, upholding the customs that maintain the community's relationship with nature even as external forces try to transform it.

Ray's portrayal of Bonda women is marked by their unique clothing, beadwork, and shaven heads- subverts the contemporary perspectives that frequently label them as exotic and primitive. Instead, their everyday work transforms into a form of ecological defiance and conservation. Through activities such as collecting forest resources and managing Donger Chas (shifting cultivation), they sustain the ecological knowledge inherited through generations. The Bonda women recall the names and uses of medicinal herbs, follow the cultural rituals and heritage that connects the community to its surroundings. Their refusal to adopt "civilized" attire or embrace modern consumer habits symbolizes a rejection of commodifying principles of industrial modernity. In this regard, their bodies and labour remain autonomous realms that resist the encroachment of an extractive economy.

Through this story, Ray reinterprets the idea of environmental justice within a postcolonial framework. Justice for Bonda should not only involve financial compensation or the redistribution of resources; it demands acknowledgement of their ontological and epistemic rights. True justice involves recognizing the Bonda's right to their own and unique way of living and realizing that the forest is not merely a group of trees but a space of cultural,

spiritual, and communal significance. It also requires epistemic justice, where Bonda ecological knowledge is acknowledged as an advanced environmental science rather than dismissed as superstition.

Ultimately, the novel promotes a transition from exploitation of coexistence via a bio-centric framework that dismisses the hierarchy of human dominance over nature. By the end, Ray presents not a traditional conclusion but a survival manifesto, where the resilience of the Bonda becomes a powerful critique of a contemporary society that values profit over ecological balance and depicts environmental justice as the restoration of the human connection to the land.

IV. CONCLUSION

Pratibha Ray's *Adibhoomi* goes beyond the traditional boundaries of fiction to emerge as a powerful critique of the "slow violence" inherent in industrial modernity. Through the perspective of Postcolonial Ecocriticism, the story illustrates that the dilemma confronting the Bonda tribe is not merely an economic or environmental concern; it signifies a deep ontological displacement. When the state begins to commercialize the "Primal Land", it destabilizes the very foundation of indigenous identity. The Forest, previously a sacred and living space rich in cultural and spiritual significance, is now changed into a location for production and extraction. In this process, the native cosmology that once shaped the Bonda perspective is gradually replaced by a barren logic of development and economic exploitation.

The study suggests that the Bonda perspective- often overlooked by outsiders as primitive- actually represents a sophisticated bio-centric framework for coexistence that is highly pertinent in today's global ecological crisis. Their spiritual and material connection with the forest reflects a system of reciprocity instead of domination. From this perspective, the survival of indigenous peoples is intertwined with the safeguarding of sacred landscapes, where loss equates to the loss of cultural identity and spiritual belonging. At the same time, the story critiques the prevailing model of postcolonial development, which often functions as a form of "second colonization". In the name of progress, government- driven development initiatives eliminate indigenous knowledge systems and practices, leading to a type of epistemicide. Within this context, Bonda women serve as powerful agents of resistance, preserving the community's connection with the land through rituals, traditional ecological knowledge, and sustainable labour practices.

Moving forward, the concept of true environmental justice must extend beyond the limited scope of distributive justice

provided by legal systems. For communities like the Bonda, justice must take the form of restorative recognition that acknowledges their sovereignty over cultural, spiritual, and ecological stories. Such recognition necessitates honouring their right to manage their ancestral territories according to their traditional knowledge and values. Ultimately, *Adibhoomi* serves as a prophetic warning in the era of the Anthropocene. As the modern world faces the repercussions of ecological destruction, the Bonda's primordial ecological consciousness serves as a reminder that people are not merely residents of the Earth but are intrinsically a part of it. The survival of the Bonda and their Adibhoomi represents not just the safeguarding of an indigenous culture, but also the survival of humanity's profound spiritual bond with the natural environment.

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